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More Worldly Than Wise

Bush's foreign policy is prudent and mainstream

While Ronald Reagan was strolling through Red Square with Mikhail Gorbachev in May, George Bush was at his summer home in Kennebunkport, Me. Asked his reaction, the Vice President was cautious, skeptical—not at all the gosh-golly cheerleader he is so often depicted to be. "The cold war isn't over," he warned. Bush's praise for the President's summiteering was so faint that his chief of staff, Craig Fuller, felt obliged to take Bush aside and ask if he realized that his dour comments would clash noticeably with White House jubilation. "I know," Bush replied. "That's okay."

Reagan is at heart a romantic; Bush is not. The President has gone from a simplistic view of the "Evil Empire" to fantasies of a nuclear-free world. Bush wants to nudge perceptions of the Soviets back to a more pragmatic middle ground. Now that he has begun to spell out his own plans for diplomacy and defense, as he did in carefully wrought speeches in Chicago and Corpus Christi, Texas, last week, Bush is not only opening a crack of daylight between himself and Reagan, he is re-emerging as a paragon of what for much of the past decade was thought to be an endangered if not extinct species in the Grand Old Party—a moderate Republican.

The differences between the President and his would-be successor are matters of sensibility rather than substance, but they nonetheless signal that come January the Reagan Revolution could give way to the Bush Restoration, a return to power for the foreign-policy establishment. Brent Scowcroft, who served as Gerald Ford's National Security Adviser, calls Bush a "Rockefeller Republican." Scowcroft intends the label as high praise, but Republican conservatives have held it against Bush for years that he seemed to be from the same mold as Nelson Rockefeller, the champion of moderate Republicanism in the '60s.

Reagan envisions the Strategic Defense Initiative as an impregnable, invulnerable shield that will end forever the specter of nuclear war but that will also do away with nuclear deterrence. Bush is more realistic: he thinks the feasibility of SDI has yet to be proved. He favors research but not early deployment. In his Chicago speech, Bush carefully stopped short of prejudging whether a full-scale SDI would make sense. While vowing not to leave America "defenseless" against ballistic missiles, he stressed less grandiose possibilities than a full-scale SDI, such as using its benefits to counter the threat of shorter-range ballistic weapons.

Bush, a former CIA director, supports Reagan's policy of using covert action and military aid to assist anti-Communist rebels. But while Reagan ennobled—and romanticized—the policy by calling its recipients "freedom fighters," his more prosaic Vice President talks about the problems of waging "low-intensity conflict." Bush wants to continue funding the Nicaraguan *contras*, but, says Kim Holmes of the conservative Heritage Foundation, "I don't think he would ever have called them the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers." If Reagan's beau ideal of the swashbuckling American good guy is Oliver North, Bush seems to prefer Chester Crocker. He admires the low-key Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs for his seven-year quest (as yet unfulfilled) of a settlement in Angola and Namibia.

Bush's essentially moderate leanings leave plenty of room for sharp differences with Dukakis. The Massachusetts Governor favors sanctions against South Africa; Bush opposes them. Dukakis would halt aid to the *contras;* Bush would not. Dukakis would eliminate most new nuclear-weapons programs; Bush would not. Dukakis virtually panders to Israel, while Bush is more sympathetic than Dukakis to the concerns of moderate Arab nations.

The Bush campaign is eager to paint Dukakis as naively isolationist and, as one aide put it, "Gorby-gaga." Dukakis, they warn, is a "multilateralist" who would feel bound by international law even when it may not be in the U.S.'s best interests. Yet Bush would also be less "unilateralist" than Reagan. Bush wants the U.S. to provide "cooperative leadership" to the industrialized democracies and keep up a "prudent projection of force" around the world. Although this is not all that different from what Dukakis says, behind the rhetorical nuances lies a significant difference: Bush is more likely than Dukakis to intervene in regional disputes, through covert or military action, when he believes that American commitments or national interests are at stake.

The new campaign chairman, James Baker, is a likely Secretary of State in a Bush Administration. As Treasury Secretary, Baker abandoned the militant laissez-faire attitude of hard-core Reaganauts when it came to international economic policy, and instead forged agreements to coordinate currencies and stave off an all-out trade war. It was the sort of friendly persuasion and artful compromise that his predecessor Donald Regan scorned. This blend of cooperation with allies and assertive U.S. leadership could be a model for the way he and Bush would approach diplomacy.

Bush has visited no fewer than 74 countries as Vice President, and knows scores of foreign leaders well. He has been a credible salesman for Reagan's policies abroad as well as a tactful adviser in the Oval Office. But he has never shone as an innovator or a creative thinker. As a participant in White House national security

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meetings. Bush rarely volunteers strong views. Few colleagues have been able to discern what he really cares about in foreign policy.

Bush instinctively seeks the reasonable course, the middle ground. Associates say he was clearly nervous when the Soviets and the U.S. all but ceased communicating after the Geneva walkout in 1983 and privately urged Reagan to put the relationship back on track. When arms-control negotiations resumed in 1985, Bush applauded the President's toughness but sided with Secretary of State George Shultz against the Pentagon in favor of the compromises necessary to make a deal.

Given his long and varied experience, Bush's occasional lapses of judgment are worrisome. He was in charge of a drug-interdiction task force, yet he did not insist that the Administration get tough with Manuel Noriega when information started coming in that the Panamanian strongman was involved in drug-running. Instead of trying to explain his position—America's national interest sometimes requires dealing for military reasons with some highly unsavory characters—Bush has maintained that he was not aware of Noriega's dirty dealings. Likewise, he fawned all over Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos during a 1981 trip rather than help set the stage there for the eventual transition to democracy.

Bush's greatest problem in foreign policy may be answering the "Where was George?" question. How does he explain the numerous times he has seemed to be invisible when major blunders were made? The most troubling example is the Iran-*contra* affair. He was in charge of an antiterrorism task force that asserted that the U.S. should never negotiate with terrorists, but Bush says he did not piece together the fact that secret U.S. arms shipments to Iran became an arms-for-hostages deal even though George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger spoke out against it. And although he met with those involved in covert activities in Central America, he says he never discovered that a major enterprise to illegally finance the *contras* was being run from the White House. Even if Bush is taken at his word, both cases illustrate a dismaying lack of curiosity, moral concern or willingness to question the policies of others. They indicate that his much vaunted experience has not fully instilled the wisdom required to stave off such fiascos.

No one with as many years of public service as George Bush can emerge with an unblemished record. Even detractors tend to agree that he is informed, sensible, prudent and decent. But to exploit Dukakis' relative inexperience in foreign policy, as he eagerly hopes to do, Bush will have to convey that his years of playing loyal handmaiden to others have not drained him of a clear sense of the foreign policy goals, convictions and principles that he would assert as his own. —*By Alessandra Stanley/Washington*